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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0858  
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RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0131  
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RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0067  
RUEHBFI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0092  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000600

SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (NICOLAIDIS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/14/2017

TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S BERDIMUHAMMEDOV REACHES OUT TO REGIONAL LEADERS

REF: ASHGABAT 489

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Classified By: Classified by Charge d'Affaires a.i. Jennifer L. Brush f or reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

¶1. (C) Since his February 11 inauguration, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov has engaged in an unprecedented level of international engagement, a significant departure from the practices of his xenophobe predecessor. Since his May 11-12 meetings with Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev (reftel), Berdimuhamedov traveled again to Russia June 9-10, (the St. Petersburg Commonwealth of Independent States Informal Summit) and to Iran June 15-16 (septel). He also has met with officials from Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Turkey, the United States and Uzbekistan, and is scheduled to meet with the President of Afghanistan in July in Ashgabat and travel to EU Headquarters in Brussels and other European capitals in September. Many of the meetings have resulted in tangible steps toward rapprochement with regional countries, such as agreements to open embassies in Baku and Tbilisi, and an invitation for Berdimuhamedov to participate as an honored guest in the August 16 Shanghai Cooperation Organization conference in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Although the increased foreign affairs activity is mostly driven by the interest of country leaders in meeting with the new Turkmenistani president since his inauguration in February, Berdimuhamedov is taking advantage of their interest to weigh alternatives for future economic expansion.

End Summary.

State Visit to Astana

¶2. (C) Following on the heels of the May 12 tripartite summit meeting in Turkmenistan between Berdimuhamedov, Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev (reftel), Turkmenistan's president traveled to Kazakhstan May 28-29 for a two-day state visit. Berdimuhamedov, expressing the intent to better relations with regional neighbors, told Nazarbayev that Turkmenistan would take "active part" in future CIS meetings. The two presidents signed a bilateral treaty on trade, economic, scientific, technical and cultural cooperation that extends to the year 2020. Nazarbayev described the new relationship as "pragmatic," with a shared interest in exporting the two countries' gas to Russia and beyond. (Comment: Securing Kazakh companies' participation in exploiting Turkmenistan's hydrocarbon resources could prove a helpful step toward increasing foreign investment in this important economic sector. A possible positive effect of the improving Turkmenistani-Kazakhstani relations, along with the possible positive relations with Azerbaijan, is a better atmosphere for Caspian delimitation talks, especially for determining the tripartite point between the three countries. End Comment.)

Meeting the Neighbors at CIS Summit

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¶3. (C) Berdimuhamedov met with Uzbekistani President Islom Karimov June 9 at the informal CIS summit held near St. Petersburg, Russia. It was the first meeting between the two presidents since Berdimuhamedov was inaugurated in February. The meeting between the two presidents appeared friendly and both stressed the importance of "fraternal relations," according to Turkmenistan's media, with special attention given to cooperation in the gas sphere. Berdimuhamedov made

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a concerted effort to honor Karimov, noting the historical ties between the Uzbek and Turkmen peoples. (Comment: The meeting was well-publicized in Turkmenistan's media -- an indication that the government viewed it as both important and positive. Berdimuhamedov publicly mentioned the meeting with the Uzbekistani president in his June 13 visit to Dashoguz, a northern province with a large ethnic Uzbek population, stating that it was important for Turkmenistan to maintain good relations with neighbors. Former President Niyazov and Karimov hated each other, and Karimov did not attend Niyazov's funeral or Berdimuhamedov's inauguration. Better relations between the two countries may be necessary to further their common interest in increasing gas exports and in resolving a host of issues, including a reportedly extensive illegal trade in narcotics. End Comment.)

¶4. (U) Turkmenistan's president also met with Georgia's President Mikhail Saakashvili on June 9 at the informal CIS summit, and the two agreed that Turkmenistan would open an embassy in Georgia in order to promote increased cooperation. Turkmenistan's media published in its entirety on June 11 Saakashvili's post-meeting interview. Georgia's Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burdjanadze visited Ashgabat Jun 6-7, where her meetings with Berdimuhamedov and Turkmenistan's Parliamentary Speaker Akja Nurberdiyeva received wide press coverage, with an emphasis on parliamentary exchanges and increased contacts, including direct Tbilisi-Ashgabat flights.

¶5. (SBU) Finally, Berdimuhamedov met with Azerbaijan's President Aliyev at the summit -- the first actual meeting between the two men, in addition to the several very positive phone conversations over the past few weeks. The meeting led to the June 11 announcement that Turkmenistan would reopen its embassy in Baku, shut six years ago ostensibly due to a budget shortfall on Turkmenistan's side. Within Ashgabat's diplomatic corps improved relations between the two former Soviet republics are perceived as the most positive, and potentially most mutually beneficial, foreign policy outcome

of Berdimuhamedov's accession.

Invitation To Participate In SCO As Honorary Guest

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¶6. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov met Kyrgyzstani Foreign Minister Ednan Karabayev on June 12 in Ashgabat. They discussed improving relations and the possibility of opening a Turkmenistani embassy in Bishkek. Karabayev conveyed Kyrgyzstan President Bakiyev's formal invitation for a presidential visit to Bishkek in 2008, as well as an invitation to take part as an honored guest in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization conference, to be held in Bishkek August 16. Western members of the diplomatic corps are not so sanguine about this development, questioning whether Berdimuhamedov is willing to dilute Turkmenistan's neutrality policy.

Turkey Disappointed

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¶7. (C) A delegation of Turkish energy officials, led by Turkish Energy Minister Guler, met with Berdimuhamedov on June 11 to underline the importance of Turkmenistani electricity currently sent to Turkey via Iran and push for the president to continue to give lucrative construction contracts to Turkish firms. The atmospherics surrounding this visit were a bit strange, as the visit appeared to focus on arguably the least important aspect of Turkey's energy relations -- electricity, with little to no mention of Turkey's long, vocal advocacy of a Trans-Caspian pipeline. The almost petty focus on contracts and rights of Turkish

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workers in Turkmenistan also shows Turkey's conflict with reconciling its short-term business interests with its long-term goal of becoming a Central Asian/European energy hub. And finally the as- yet-unanswered request for Berdimuhamedov to visit Ankara is striking. Many here guessed that Turkey would be at the top of Berdimuhamedov's travel plans given the Turkish-Turkmen mantra of "one nation, two states," first articulated by late Turkish President Turgut Ozal when he visited Turkmenistan and kissed the ground in 1992. Even the Turkish Ambassador has quietly expressed his disappointment to Charge that Berdimuhamedov still has not committed to a date.

Electricity to Afghanistan

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¶8. (SBU) Afghanistan's Energy Minister Ismail Khan brought a delegation to Asghabat June 8 in an attempt to secure a long-term contract for increasing supplies of Turkmenistani electricity currently being sent to Herat and Mazar-i-sharif via a memorandum of understanding. Though a protocol was signed the two sides are still far apart on agreeing on pricing mechanisms and construction of a 500 KM transmission line.

¶9. (SBU) President Karzai is scheduled to come to Ashgabat in July or August, which would make him the third head of state to visit Turkmenistan, following the inauguration, since the reftel tripartite meeting among Berdimuhamedov, Putin and Nazarbayev.

And Finally Europe

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¶10. (U) EU Special Representative for Central Asia Pierre Morel visited Ashgabat on June 7 and invited Berdimuhamedov to Brussels and other European capitals in September. The European presence generally has not been very strong in Ashgabat, but the opening of a Polish Embassy earlier this year and an Italian Embassy later this year will strengthen the EU presence here by 50%.

Comment

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¶11. (C) While he was alive Niyazov himself was the biggest obstacle to Turkmenistan's integration not only regionally but internationally. By the end of his life, hardly anyone was knocking on his door. With the ascendance of Foreign Affairs Deputy Chairman Rashit Meredov, and Berdimuhamedov's inexperience in international affairs, the Government of Turkmenistan appears more interested in working with its neighbors to resolve cross-border issues, including the need for increased trade, strengthened law enforcement and counternarcotics cooperation, and more energy export options, and Turkmenistan's citizens and regional leaders alike clearly want to see this happen. Much of this activity remains passive -- Berdimuhamedov accepts invitations and listens to visiting guests, but he makes no offers himself. Given his lack of experience, contact with the outside world could help him develop a sense of opportunity for his nation and his people, rather than considering anything foreign as suspect. End Comment

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